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Letter to Editor

A proud soldier – COVID-19 frontline warrior

Ruchi Goyal ^{1,*}, Lalit Gupta ¹¹Dept. of Anaesthesia and Critical Care, Maulana Azad Medical College and Lok Nayak Hospital, New Delhi, India

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Dear Editor,

I am writing to share my experience as a frontline healthcare worker during the COVID-19 pandemic in India. As a newly graduated doctor in 2020, I started my internship along with nearly 200 other medical students, all with a zeal to learn, passion to treat, and save lives. However, little did we know that we were about to face a crisis that would test our resilience, courage, and determination.

In March 2020, India announced its first lockdown, and the healthcare system became overwhelmed by the increasing number of COVID patients. As a frontline healthcare worker with just 03 months of internship, my daily routine comprised waking up with hope and gathering strength to save patients, along with the distressing fear of having symptoms. We had to adapt to new rosters for duties, changes in hostel room allocations, quarantines, and isolations. Despite the difficult circumstances, we motivated our patients and gave them hope of living, and we continued to work hard. However, losing patients to the deadly virus despite our hard work was heart-breaking, and we went back to our rooms with a head full of angst, sadness, and despair. Looking at the mirror, I saw a face that looked odd with discoloration and a scraped nose. The N95 mask left several patches on my face, which marked me as a warrior. I used to wonder whether the role of a warrior was something I asked for? A life full of sacrifice.

The second wave of COVID-19 in India came like a Tsunami and caught us all unaware. We lost many lives on duty, and the healthcare infrastructure got overwhelmed. However, the professional resilience, courage, and devotion to duty demonstrated by frontline healthcare workers were outstanding. We were like the Sepoy- little soldiers, who had to sacrifice our own families to take care of the patients. While I was counselling the family members of the patients to follow COVID-19 appropriate behaviours and to be hopeful and pray for their loved ones every day, meeting my own family and taking care of them was out of the picture. It was panic at its worst, receiving numerous phone calls/messages daily from patients, relatives, friends suffering from COVID, many of them requiring oxygen and requesting admission.

Now, it has been three years since the pandemic started, and I am an anaesthesiology resident in a prestigious institute in India, managing patients requiring critical care support and dealing with anguish of families every day. The courage, the devotion, and the determination to save lives are engraved in this Sepoy. I'm a proud soldier, a COVID-19 frontline warrior, and will always remain so. I am writing to you today not just to share my story but also to highlight the challenges faced by doctors and frontline healthcare workers during the pandemic.

According to a study published in *The Lancet* (2020), healthcare workers are at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 due to their frequent exposure to infected patients. As healthcare workers, we are trained to face

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: ruchigoyal403@gmail.com (R. Goyal).

challenges, to fight against diseases and viruses, to be the shield between the virus and the community.¹ But, COVID-19 was not just another virus; it was a pandemic, and it caught us all off-guard. The commitment and professionalism demonstrated by healthcare workers throughout the pandemic are evident to all. WHO estimates that between 80,000 and 180,000 health and care workers could have died from COVID-19 in the period between January 2020 to May 2022.² These deaths are a tragic loss and an irreplaceable gap in the world's pandemic response.

As of April 2023, India is still battling the virus, but we have come a long way. The vaccination drive has helped in controlling the spread of the virus, and we have a better understanding of the disease and how to manage it.³ The situation is not as dire as it was in 2020, but we must not let our guard down. We must continue to follow COVID-19 appropriate behaviours and guidelines to ensure that we do not see another surge in cases. It is also imperative that healthcare workers are provided with the necessary resources, support, and protection to continue their work.⁴ Doctors and healthcare workers are not soldiers, and they should not be treated as such. They are human beings who have been working tirelessly to save lives and contain the pandemic.

In conclusion, I would like to urge the authorities to prioritize the healthcare system's strengthening and ensure that frontline healthcare workers are well-equipped and well-trained to tackle any future health emergencies. Also, it is essential to recognize and acknowledge the sacrifice and

hard work of frontline healthcare workers, who have been fighting the pandemic selflessly. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenging time for all of us, but I remain hopeful that we will overcome it together.

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Author biography

Ruchi Goyal, Post Graduate Student  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3515-239X>

Lalit Gupta, Associate Professor  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7291-5961>

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